

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN GRADE 10 BOYS BY
CHALLENGING THE MASTER NARRATIVE

Tammy Bechus and Kristy Carlisle

St David's Marist Inanda, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

This action research project investigated the extent to which Grade 10 boys were able to develop their critical thinking skills through a process that allowed them to challenge the master narrative. While we continue to teach from a mostly British literary canon, we hoped to develop in our students, the ability to recognise a "single story" and to give voice to the unheard stories in that narrative. We used the play, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller as our master narrative.

This action research ran over eight weeks and students participated in the research on a voluntary basis. At St David's, the Grade 10s have a timetabled 60-minute period once a week in which they are free to study a skill or subject of their choosing. Our research project was offered as an "elective," and all our participants chose to be involved. In the elective sessions, the students watched the film version of *The Crucible* and then participated in a number of activities that involved formal assessments, group discussions, and expression through various creative avenues. An analysis of a baseline test and a summative test was conducted, and these tests, along with field notes, discussion groups and interviews, provided the data for our report.

The research findings suggest that over the course of this action research project, the critical thinking skills of most students did improve and, more specifically, the students acquired tolerance for ambiguity, an intellectual curiosity, and an awareness of the links between power and text production. As a result, we advocate that it would be beneficial to expose all Grade 10 students to the activities introduced in this research project.

Glossary

Critical literacy: Blake (2016) defines critical literacy as the ability to take apart various texts in media or writing to find any possible biases that the author might have embedded in their presentation of the world. Ira Shor (1999) writes that critical literacy can be used to reveal one's subjective beliefs about the world by causing them to question their assumptions through using words.

Master narrative: The master narrative is generally described as the colonially-derived story of events, emphasising European perspectives. The master narrative functions as a legitimisation of existing power relations, knowledge and norms.

Single story: In her 2009 TED talk, Chimamanda Adichie uses this term to describe a collection of narratives that reinforce stereotypes of marginalised peoples and perpetuate power paradigms while silencing other truths.

Counter-storytelling: Solorzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told." As such, counter-stories can be used to challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterisations.

Giving voice: Amplifying the narratives of the historically oppressed and marginalised.

Challenge: Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as to dispute the truth or validity of something.

Introduction

*“Until the lions have their own historians,
the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”*

– African proverb

In a much-celebrated 2009 TED Talk, Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argued that inherent in the power of stories is a danger – the danger of reducing the complexity of human experience to a single narrative. Her talk resonated with us and has particular significance in our South African context where the decolonisation of education is a pressing issue. Historical and social positioning determine the stories that we tell and, as South Africans, we are acutely aware that our history of colonisation and apartheid has shaped the stories that we have been told and continue to tell.

The literature covered in the Grade 12 English curriculum is prescribed by the Independent Examinations Board of South Africa and, as such, we have little control over the texts our students are required to study in their final year at school. Although we are free to select our

material for the lower grades, this freedom is constrained somewhat by the need to prepare our students for the types of texts they will cover in their final examinations. When selecting texts for Grades 8-11, we certainly attempt to include other voices and narratives to expose our mostly white privileged students to other worlds. However, we are aware that these attempts are grossly inadequate and run the risk of inadvertently promoting the master narrative.

The inspiration for our research grew from a desire to find an authentic way in which to include marginalised voices in the English curriculum without perpetuating stereotypes or resorting to "tokenism." By giving voice to unheard stories, we hoped to find a way to encourage our students to approach all texts with healthy scepticism and to "listen" for what has been left unsaid. As teachers of boys, we are cognisant of the fact that boys appreciate the "opportunity to make independent choices, ones that could define a direction or perhaps lead to the discovery of some aspect of the lesson that was of personal interest" (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, p.148). We hoped, therefore, that their imaginations and their readiness to learn would be fostered through the freedom in expression and exploration that this process allowed. Ultimately, we hoped that our action research would provide students with the opportunity to express what they believe has been left unsaid in "single stories" (Adichie, 2009).

The Literature Review

Stories "order the world around us and anchor how we think and feel" (Sarkisyan, 2018, p.6), which is why Adichie (2009) both celebrated the power of narrative as a means of cultivating humanity, but also warned of the dangers of seeing a single story as the definitive story of a people. These single stories, or master narratives, are the vehicles through which a culture communicates its ideology and, as such, they function as a legitimization of existing power relations, knowledge, and norms.

Toni Morrison (as cited in Greene, 2014) points out that the master narrative "has a certain point of view" (p. 2), which she sums up as "white male life" (p.2). Similarly, Bissonnette and Glazier (2015) use the term "dominant story" (p.2) and define it as "that which is told by or represents the experiences common to white heterosexual males" (p.2). Given this range of terms, "single story," "master narrative," and "dominant story" are used interchangeably in this report.

The obvious danger of the master narrative is that it reinforces stereotypes of marginalised peoples and "essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a group's cultural life" (Montecinos as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p.28). The English Literature curriculum has "historically enforced master narratives" (Borsheim-Black, Maculoso & Petrone as cited in

Bissonnette & Glazier, 2014, p.1). Therefore, when selecting texts for our students, we try to include other "voices" and narratives to expose our students to other worlds. While well-intentioned, these attempts are often inadequate and may amount to nothing more than tokenism. In fact, Ehst and Hermann-Wilmarth (2014) warn that a perfunctory attempt to be inclusive might inadvertently "promote a single-story mentality" (p.24). It is also important, therefore, to teach our students to challenge the master narratives presented to them. We need to "trouble the single story" (Ehst & Hermann-Wilmarth, p.24).

The power that storytelling holds is key to this research and the ability that stories have to "bring a version of the world to light that so transforms the way people see" (Disch, 1993, p.665) is of particular relevance. Narratives bring into the open "rich, detailed and often personal perspectives" (Hyvarinen, 2007, p.447) that make them valuable tools with which to explore not only our society but our reaction to the social constructs that exist around us. There are "recognisable components in storytelling that are familiar to us all" (Woodhouse, p.64) – we have an understanding of who the heroes and villains are – but these stories can be rewritten (Sarkisyan, 2018, p.5) and in so doing, the counter-narrative is created.

Solórzano and Yosso, (2002) define the counter-narrative or counter-story as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p.32) and also note it is a "vehicle through which to subvert the white dominant narrative and provide a voice to groups from historically marginalised backgrounds" (p.32). Greene (2014) states that a counter-narrative that expands the master narrative allows for our understanding to be broadened and provides us with the perspective of those whose voices have been silenced, marginalised, and depicted in stereotypical ways.

While counter-stories can be used to "repair the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems" (Nelson & Lindemann, 2001, p.xiii), Bissonnette and Glazier (2015) note that "the practice of counter-storytelling likewise benefits students belonging to the majoritarian [dominant] group as well" as it allows them to "develop their own socio-political consciousness" (p.4).

In light of the understanding that the ultimate goal of teaching is to "stimulate young people to question" (Daniel et al., 2005, p.337), the need to teach students how to be critical thinkers is of paramount importance. Critical thinking requires deliberate teaching and educators are poised to become more "active stewards of critical thinking and agents of change" (Graff, 2010, p.107).

The emergence of "fake news" is seen by many as a deliberate attempt to mislead, to cause damage, or to gain financially or politically. Some have also argued that it is a threat to democracy and free debate. Daniel et al. (2005), for example, refer to Lipman (1988), who regarded critical thinking as a "useful tool for countering uncritical thinking and thoughtless action" (p.337), and who went on to state that individuals need critical thinking to help them distinguish the most relevant information they receive. Furthermore, Daniel et al. point to the fact that education is becoming increasingly complex as the expansion of knowledge combined with the accelerated development of technologies further complicates life in our society. In this regard, the development of critical thinking in learners is, as Delors (1996) states, necessary to ensure that the students acquire a true comprehension of events rather than developing and maintaining a simplified vision of the information related to these events. We contended, therefore, that counter-storytelling would develop in our students the ability to ask questions about representation, voice, and power in the literature they are required to read. Moreover, we believed that counter-storytelling would improve their critical literacy skills and enable them to step back and ask questions about the production of all texts they encounter in their daily lives.

Research Context

St David's Marist Inanda is an independent Catholic boys' school situated in the heart of Inanda, an affluent suburb of Johannesburg. The campus incorporates a pre-primary, preparatory school and college that caters for over 1200 boys. Although the majority of the boys come from privileged homes, the teachers strive to instil in them the principles of simplicity, humility, and modesty, which are the core values of a Marist education.

The St David's Mission Statement describes the school as: "an African school preparing boys to take their place in society and to build South Africa as enquiring, well-balanced individuals aware of their social responsibilities to the wider community and ready to respond with compassion and justice to the realities of society" (St David's Mission Statement).

We worked with a small cohort of twenty Grade 10 boys with whom we had regular contact. It was a racially diverse group of boys aged 15 to 16 years-old whom we saw for an hour every week for seven weeks in September and October 2018. We used an elective lesson for our action research, so it did not necessitate taking time from the English curriculum.

The boys and their parents provided written consent for their participation, which allowed us to video, photograph, and interview them throughout the research project. In turn, we undertook to ensure their anonymity in the communication of data and findings.

The Action

This project aimed to challenge the master narrative and, in so doing, develop the students' critical literacy skills. We showed the students the film version of *The Crucible*, which we chose as our master narrative. Following this, lessons focused on discussions around the text and, more specifically, the "unheard voices" in the text. When designing our lessons, we kept in mind that boys respond well to lessons in which "problems [are] posed to which the outcome [is] indeterminate" (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, p.70). In light of this, the students were encouraged to consider the characters who are silenced in the play and were given the opportunity to provide their own counter-stories. Furthermore, boys "love being part of a group effort" (Reichert & Hawley, p.181) and so we allowed them to work through a series of discussion questions in groups of 3 to 4. Feedback was then provided to the rest of the class. Action research provided us with the perfect tool to interrogate this topic as the investment in time and energy that this process involved provided the students with "a sense of ownership and connection to the process and outcomes" (Ferrance, 2000, p.29).

Data Collection

We used a mixed methods approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. We began the data collection process by asking the boys to complete a baseline assessment that investigated their critical literacy skills when presented with different types of texts, such as advertisements, photographs, newspaper headlines, cartoons and book jackets. We then showed them the 1996 film version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, after which we asked them to write down their initial reactions to the characters and to assess their respective "blameworthiness" with regards to the famous witch trials that took place in Salem. Following this, we put them into groups where they discussed specific questions given to them. These discussion points encouraged them to apply questions of representation, voice, and power to the study of *The Crucible*. The boys' answers were recorded and used as data.

While the boys were having their discussions, we moved around the classroom and took field notes. In their final written task, the boys were encouraged to investigate multiple viewpoints by producing creative texts that gave voice to the silenced. A final assessment, similar to the initial baseline assessment, was given to the boys to determine whether their critical literacy skills had improved.

Data Analysis

Our initial data were collected through a baseline test that we asked the boys to complete. The test was based on a variety of texts pertaining to topical issues. As the assessment of critical thinking can often be subjective, we used a set of descriptors supplied by the Independent Examinations Board of South Africa to mark the tests. These descriptors focus on extended critical thinking and, for a response to be awarded full marks, the student had to demonstrate understanding, application, analysis, complex inference, and/or synthesis, evaluation, or appreciation. Only two boys achieved 70% or above for this test. Many of the answers lacked specific detail and the students often failed to elaborate on their initial observations.

After the test, we showed the students the film *The Crucible*. We did not discuss any aspect of the film while viewing it, but as soon as it ended, we asked the students to write down who they thought was most responsible for the events that took place and why. The majority believed that 17-year old Abigail Williams was "most guilty" of causing the deaths of the innocent members of the Salem community. This response was interesting, but not unexpected as Abigail is "easy" to blame for the hangings that take place in the text; however, a deeper analysis of her story would suggest that she was, in fact, both disempowered and vulnerable.

In the next lesson, we put the boys in groups and gave them the opportunity to discuss the film in terms of the specific guidelines we provided. It soon became apparent that the majority of the boys had been a passive audience and were "preferred readers." This means that they responded to the characters in the film in the way in which the writer and director intended. Initially, when we suggested alternative viewpoints, they thought that we were "reading too much into things."

After the discussion sessions, the students were invited to give voice to the possible thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the characters from *The Crucible*. This was possibly the most enjoyable step in the process because of the creativity involved and the freedom it afforded our students in terms of how they were able to respond to the tasks: journals, art, storyboards, poetry, videos, and social media pages. It was in the counter-storytelling that it became evident that the students were now able to empathise with specific characters; it was no longer a purely intellectual exercise. Their work was collected and used to create a visual journal that was a vivid expression of the silenced characters in the film.

In the final stages of our research, we administered a final assessment, the results of which we compared to the baseline assessment conducted at the start of our project. While our data

showed that the critical thinking skills of our students had improved, the difference in their scores was mostly marginal. Despite this, we noticed a marked improvement in their ability to "read against" a text.

Discussion of Results

Three themes or patterns emerged from the analysis of our data. These were:

1. Tolerance for ambiguity
2. Increased intellectual curiosity
3. Awareness of the links between power and text production

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Perhaps most encouraging was that our students developed a tolerance for ambiguity and were prepared to stay with the question, despite the discomfort of not knowing the answer. Most students avoid ambiguity as they want to wrap things up neatly; however, not having a clear answer can provide opportunities for more complex thinking as it allows students to consider issues in ways that are new to them. Interestingly, this seemed to be more difficult for the students who were the top academics in the grade, perhaps because it required relinquishing control, or because their identities were based on "knowing the answers." For example, in the early stages of our research, Student H, who is one of the top ten students in the grade, repeatedly interrupted our discussions to ask what the "right answer" was so that he could write it down. Also, at the end of one of our first sessions, Student P stayed behind and wanted to read back some of his notes to make sure they were "correct."

As we moved through the process, the students' tolerance for ambiguity grew, and this was most noticeable in a subtle, but meaningful, change in the language that our students used when answering questions. In the baseline assessments, most of the students stated their opinions as facts: "Abigail is obviously to blame" (Student C); "It's her fault" (Student N). However, in the final assessment, the phrasing of their answers had evolved and suggested some level of acceptance that they did not have the requisite information to form an accurate opinion on the issues raised. Answers to questions began with qualifications such as, "With what I know at the moment..." (Student A), "With the information I have been given..." (Student J), and "I can't be sure, but..." (Student N).

Increased Intellectual Curiosity

Initially, we were concerned that by challenging the students to read against the grain, they might become frustrated or overly cynical. This was not the case. Instead, it seemed to

encourage intellectual curiosity and a thirst to know more. Student N expressed it this way: "I realised that I've been lazy, and now I can't wait to take another look at everything I thought was true." Our favourite answer came from Student X who wrote: "I don't know... yet."

Perhaps the best illustration of a thirst for knowledge involved a student with a very fixed set of ideas, Student B. Student B was initially reluctant to question the power of the church. When we started this project, we selected *The Crucible* as our text because it does not directly challenge the racial or cultural identities of our South African students. Considering our country's recent and traumatic history of colonisation and apartheid, we wanted to give our students the freedom to explore potentially contentious issues without having to justify their stance in terms of the social and political realities of South Africa. The fact that the characters are Puritans living in 17th century America meant that most of the issues raised were "safe" and did not elicit strong emotional reactions. The only potentially "sensitive" area was religion.

St David's is a Catholic school, and in one class discussion, Student D brought up the recent revelations about the Catholic Church's involvement in the cover-up of child molestation. He believed that this was evidence that religious leaders in Salem, Massachusetts in 1652 might have knowingly permitted or encouraged the hanging of innocent people to serve their own ends. Student B became very upset, and after some prodding, it emerged that he felt that by "entertaining" such questions, he was "disloyal" to his faith. Although this was the very situation we were trying to avoid, it led to a helpful discussion about cognitive dissonance and how it can be reduced.

We were thrilled that instead of removing himself from the situation, Student B took it upon himself to do some research and gather more information. In the end, Student B concluded that scientific thinking and a belief in God were not mutually exclusive, and he continued to participate in the project. When Student B was interviewed at the end of the project, he distinguished faith and "blind faith," and said he was "happy [he] was selected" for the project.

An Awareness of the Links Between Power and Text Production

We were pleased that intellectual curiosity was not limited to the characters in the story or to the events described, but also extended to the power dynamics at play during the production of the text. During discussions of *The Crucible*, the students were encouraged to ask basic questions about representation and voice: "Whose story is this?" "Who speaks?" "Who doesn't?" "Who is heard?" "Who is not heard?" We also introduced more pointed discussion questions about the production of both the play and the film. For example:

- Arthur Miller took his inspiration for the play from the original transcripts of the witch trials in Salem. Do you think the race, gender or religion of the original scribe had any impact on the way in which the trials were documented?
- Do you think that the decision to cast actor Daniel Day-Lewis to play John Proctor influenced the audience's perception of Proctor? Do you think the audience would have viewed Proctor's relationship with seventeen-year-old Abigail differently if he was perceived to be unattractive by society?

These questions were designed to interrogate how power dynamics and texts transact: "Who speaks? Who listens? and Why?"

In the final assessment, our students were presented with a variety of texts such as cartoons, tweets, advertisements, and book-jackets. Although we limited our questions to the visual and verbal components of the texts, a few boys still raised questions about their production. For example, one of the texts included statistics from a recent study and Student F wanted to know "who funded the research?" while another student prefaced one of his answers with: "I would like to know more about the cartoonist, but..."

Conclusion

The introduction of counter-storytelling to the study of literature was an interesting and beneficial endeavour. The shift in the way in which the students engaged with the master narrative reflected the relevance of this action research. Critical thinking is a necessary and vital skill and allowing the students to give voice to the unheard stories in *The Crucible* certainly developed their ability to interrogate and investigate the text. We are now more aware than ever that critical thinking requires deliberate and thoughtful teaching. It was evident that it is not sufficient to carry out such a process on a one-off basis and then expect a radical and permanent change in the students' ability to think critically. Rather, it is necessary to implement critical thinking tasks on a regular basis. There is certainly scope for future research in this area as teachers in all school subjects should be finding ways in which to develop and encourage critical thinking in their students.

Reflection Statement

After a combined forty years of experience as English teachers, we found ourselves at a crossroads in our teaching. We felt increasingly challenged on an ethical level regarding the choices that we had to make concerning the literature that we teach. We had to ask ourselves the following questions: How can we justify teaching an English literature curriculum that

enforces the master narrative? Is it possible to cover the classics while discharging what we feel is our moral duty to expose our students to marginalised voices? Our action research project provided an opportunity for us to find out.

Over the past eighteen months, we have discovered a great deal about ourselves and the students we teach. Following our action research, we have continued to use specific tasks designed to encourage our students to challenge the master narrative. We have also enjoyed sharing these new ideas with the rest of the English Department at St David's.

Many times throughout the project, we questioned whether we had the time to do the project justice. Thankfully, we never felt this way at the same time. Being part of a research team meant that we could support each other during those times in an English teacher's life when preparation and marking become overwhelming. In the end, we surprised ourselves with what we have been able to achieve.

We were reminded of the immense influence that we, as English teachers, have on our students and of the responsibility and challenges that come with this influence. By teaching our students how to be more critically aware and to have the confidence to challenge the master narrative, we hope that we are making some contribution to preparing them for a future in an ever-changing and sometimes confusing world. Furthermore, we learnt the immense benefits of action research and the changes that it can initiate and inspire.

Our thanks must be given to Mr Mike Thiel, Headmaster of St David's, for supporting our participation in the IBSC Action Research Programme, and to our mentor and friend, Belinda Marais, for her assistance in getting us over the line on more than one occasion.

Of course, the completion of this project would have been next to impossible without the insight and guidance of our team leader, Janetta Lien. We thank her wholeheartedly for her endless enthusiasm and her commitment to her (decidedly quirky) team of action researchers.

References

- Alexander, K. (2011). Success, victims, and prodigies: "Master" and "little" cultural narratives in the literacy narrative genre. *National Council of Teachers of English*, 608-633.
- Bissonnette, J. D., & Glazier, J. (2016). A counter-story of one's own: Using counterstorytelling to engage students with the British canon. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(6), 685-694.

- Blake, C. (2016). *Defining critical literacy: Why students should understand the power of language*. Nebraska: Concordia University.
- Curwood, J. S., & Gibbons, D. (2009). "Just like I have felt": Multimodal counter-narratives in youth-produced digital media. *Formulations and Findings*, 1 (4), 59-77.
- Daniel, M.-F., Lafortune, L., Pallascio, R., Splitter, L., Slade, C., & de la Garza, T. (2005). Modeling the development process of dialogical critical thinking in pupils aged 10 to 12 years. *Communication Education*, 334-354.
- De Medeiros, K. (2016). Narrative gerontology: Countering the master narrative of aging. *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations and Interventions*, 63-81.
- Delors, J. (1996). Learning: the treasure within. Report to *UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, Unesco Publishing.
- Disch, L. (1993). More truth than fact: Storytelling as critical understanding in the writings of Hannah Arendt. *Political Theory*, 665-694.
- Ferrance, E. (2000). Action research. *Themes in Education*, 1-41.
- Graff, J. (2010). Countering narrative: Teachers' discourse about immigrants and their experiences within the realm of children's and young adult's literature. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 106-131.
- Greene, B. (2014). Toni Morrison: Recreating the master narrative. *National Black Writers' Conference*, (pp. 1-8). New York.
- Hyvärinen, M. (2007). Analysing narratives and storytelling. *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*, 447-460.
- Lewis, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382-392.
- Nelson, H. L., & Lindemann, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Cornell University Press.
- Reichert, M & Hawley, R. (2009). Teaching boys: A global study of effective practices *International Boys' Schools Coalition*, 1-257
- Sarkisyan, A. (2018, April 25). *Storytelling in STEM*. Retrieved from Learnosity.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.
- Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy? *Journal for Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*, 1(4), 2-32.
- Stringer, E. (2007). *Action research*. London: Sage.
- Woodhouse, J. (n.d.). Storytelling and narratives: sitting comfortably with learning. *Strategies for Healthcare Education* (61-70).